

CULTURAL IDENTITY IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Address delivered by:

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"American social structure may be seen, then as a national society which contains within its political boundaries a series of subsocieties based on ethnic identification. The network of organizations, informal and social relationships, and institutional activities which make up the ethnic subsociety tend to pre-empt most or all primary group relationships, while secondary relationships across ethnic group lines are carried out in the "larger society", principally in the spheres of economic and occupational life, civic and political activity, public and private non parochial education and mass entertainment."¹

1. Milton Gordon - Assimilation in American Life, the Role of Race Religion and National Origins, Oxford University Press NY 1964 p. 37

The latin root of the word identity - identicus - meaning sameness, is the ~~IDENTICAL~~ concept that I wish to explain and explore with you today. This particular definition of identity helps in bringing about the relationship between two kinds of identity; self identity, acquiring a sense of sameness and continuity, and group identity, being recognized and accepted by the group or community with whom one has some sameness. The question of identity is of vital importance to us in the kind of world in which we live, particularly in this country, and in this city, because it is basic to our individual, as well as to our group well being. At the same time, one's identity is threatened by many of the inevitable developments of modern life in the United States i.e. automation, mass culture, the growth of the large urban metropolis and the megalopolis, the concentration of power in the large monolithic units such as large corporations and large labor unions, etc... to mention just a few examples. The answer to the question, Who am I?, is then found not only in the degree of synthesis that the inner self has achieved, but also in the degree of solidarity, with one's group or one's own people. Therefore, identity is not only dependent on one's definition of self, but also upon the definition and acceptance others have given one.

Permit me to make this initial statement. One of the most constant and important factors in the process of living in the United States is group life, ethnic group life.

"Identity formation, finally, begins where the usefulness of identification ends. It arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications, and their absorption in a new configuration, which, in turn, identifies the young individual,

recognizing him as somebody who had to become the way he is, is taken for granted. The community, often not without some initial mistrust, gives such recognition with a (more or less institutionalized) display of surprise and pleasure in making the acquaintance of a newly emerging individual. For the community, in turn, feels "recognized" by the individual who cares to ask for recognition, it can, by the same token, feel deeply and vengefully - rejected by the individual who does not seem to care.¹"

Because the sense of identity is such a necessary development for healthy adult life, it should be the subject of our preoccupation at the point when it is being threatened. Because the urgency of the development of identity comes to the fore at that stage of man's life called youth; and because you as educators are so close to youth and play such an important part in youth's life, you are directly concerned with it. Because the development of identity is so closely related to the group to which the individual belongs, we all should understand group life in the United States. Yet the healthy aspects and positive contributions of group life are obscured by the attempts of established groups to deny others the right to group life by characterizing it as exclusive and against the precepts of brotherhood. The full development of the democratic society depends upon the recognition that the United States is a society composed of ethnic groups, who come together at times for religious purposes, or who will meet on the job, at political or civic

1. Psychological Issues, Vol. I No. 1, "Identity and the Life Cycle" selected papers - Erick H. Erikson, International University Press, Inc., N.Y. 1959.

school activities, in ~~schools~~ and at mass entertainment. In reality the ethnic group is the only democratic vehicle left for the minorities of the United States to achieve equal status with the rest of the American citizens. This situation is most prevalent with minority groups which are culturally or racially different from the dominant society. ~~Minority~~ Groups are both racially and culturally different ^{are} in the most critical situation. They are among the most powerless and voiceless, the poorest and the most discriminated against groups in this country. I am referring to such groups as the Mexican American, the Indian American, the Puerto Rican American and others. They are excluded either by design executed by our legal system or by submerged social mechanisms or subtle manipulations, but with none the less, effective results.

During the present civil rights revolution, the Negro American has demonstrated to other racial and cultural minorities that, "the rights and privileges of an individual rest upon the status attained by the group to which he belongs - that is to say, by the power it controls ¹ and can use."

Having started this presentation with the concept of "sameness" I must now state that the right of the different American (different by race and/or culture) to associate with those of his group for the purpose of achieving the power necessary to enter all levels of American life must be recognized. To assure this is to permit the racially and/or culturally different ethnic groups to follow the paths taken by previous

1. David Danzig, The Meaning of Negro Strategy, Commentary, The American Jewish Committee, third reprint, July 1964.

ethnic groups exemplifying the basic structure of present American society. It is also necessary to recognize that the period when the other groups, who share the same racial heritage as the dominant white society, first made their entry into the general society, economic and developmental conditions in the country were vastly different from what they are today. "Obviously the resources for earning an acceptable place in our society are far different from what they were a century ago when a grant of three acres and the ability to farm it provided a sufficient start. However, we still tend to accept the American frontier ideology of resourceful individualism in positing the requirement of success in our society, just as we still accept the classical liberal ideology of laissez-faire as the backbone of our economic system. The truth is that this frontier ideology has as little relation to the actual paths to advancement in our highly developed technocracy as the laissez-faire ideology has to the actual operation of our federally subsidized and highly integrated economy. The individual who is adequately equipped to meet its demands usually has the backing and support of community and family achievement, which helps motivate him to seek a college education and orients him in making use of it."²

The most direct and effective road for the poor, powerless racial and cultural groups in the United States to fully integrate into the "American way of life", rests on movements that should contain a series of components.

2. Ibid

1. The acquisition of self identification for youth and children of the group, which will help to provide the positive self image essential for motivation. The movement must help inculcate the sense of self esteem and self worth needed for achievement and for the emergence of ethically committed leaders dedicated to the well being of their group as well as of society at large.
2. A massive drive for education to acquire the technological skills and the professional and business preparation needed for success in the present society.
3. An organizational movement based on the identification with one's ethnic group for the purpose of developing the group life and group solidarity necessary for the acquisition of power in order to function effectively in securing equality in civil rights. Such a movement would help secure access to the decision making structures of society in this country.

Let me illustrate by describing briefly such an effort on the part of an ethnic group newly arrived to this country. A group of leaders in the Puerto Rican community of New York City, after having lived here long enough to experience, as well as to study these realities, decided to intervene to change the destructive circumstances surrounding their group in the city. The method of intervention chosen was to establish a service agency equipped to offer educational orientation and leadership development programs to Puerto Ricans desiring to obtain careers in professional, technical, artistic and commercial fields. Young Puerto Rican New Yorkers have been suffering from many of the symptoms of other

second generation Americans. In addition they have been beset by the problem of being poor and also the target of discrimination. Some of these symptoms are: the confused identity of the "marginal man", self hate and alienation from family and from his own group; low self esteem, a poor image of self, and the accompanying low aspirational and low educational achievement. Some of these youth have taken the road of anti-social behavior and rebellion against the structure and its authority, others have withdrawn into other negative avenues of escape or into apathy.

The establishment of an agency that would provide an alternative to this debilitating situation was the task at hand for the responsible leadership in the Puerto Rican community and the result of this work was the emergence of ASPIRA. ASPIRA (which is the Spanish word for aspire) is a professional agency based on certain assumptions and pursuing certain objectives. The assumptions constitute a philosophy.. a modus operandi, as well as a movement.

1. It is assumed that the social structure in New York, which the Puerto Rican must adjust to, is composed of ethnic groups (criss-crossed by class levels) which respond to the race, religious and cultural origins of its members.
2. It is assumed that the ethnic group affiliation continues for generations, even after the cultural patterns of behavior have been replaced by the so called "American ones", White Anglo-Saxon Protestant patterns, characterizing the dominant society.
3. It is assumed that the success of the Puerto Rican New Yorker in adjusting effectively to the city rests upon his ability to repeat the experience of other ethnic groups. The Puerto

Ricans must organize in order to be able to create their own institutions and agencies, ^{their} own organizations, and to develop ^{their} own leaders to speak and represent the group. This must be done for the purpose of relating to the power structure from a position of strength and on an equal status with other ethnic groups.

4. It is assumed that in the type of economic world which New York represents, the only avenue for Puerto Rican New Yorkers to achieve their successful integration into the life of the city is education.

These assumptions laid the groundwork and foundation for the establishment of the following objectives:

- I - The establishment of an agency for the purpose of offering educational services to Puerto Ricans capable of training beyond the high school level.

This aspect of the services is offered using group guidance techniques with a heavy emphasis on developing or restoring a positive self image. The technique of identification with heroes and models and the knowledge of their cultural background reinforces the development of a positive self image. The service also imparts practical knowledge as to how to pursue desired educational goals. ASPIRA helps to channel the students educational goals, through aggressive guidance, into the professions, business, artistic, and technical fields.

- II - Providing experience and training for the purpose of developing knowledgeable and committed leaders among Puerto Rican

in order youth /to enhance their identification with the Puerto Rican community of New York and to foster their dedication in finding solutions for the problems of their community.

This aspect of the service has developed into the organization of a chain of individual clubs throughout New York high schools, colleges, churches and community centers. These clubs are affiliated into a city wide federation. The philosophy of the programs offered by the clubs and the federation ~~are~~ expressed in developmental techniques for the purpose of creating self sufficient leaders who identify with their cultural group. The leaders must possess the realistic acceptance that they must extend lines of communication and work with non Puerto Ricans. The clubs also serve as strong motivation in preparing its members to pursue an education.

III - The establishment of a Federation of Puerto Rican Parents with the purposes of promoting the pursuit of education for their children by giving the necessary support in the home environment, planning early for savings toward educational plans, relating to the school to support the child's well being and success, and being knowledgeable about the educational world of today.

The group works hand in hand with the agency. It was initiated with the parents of the ASPIRA students but it has grown to include others, neighbors, relatives and friends. The relationship between ASPIRA and the Parents Federation not only engages

the parent in support of the youth's plans but it helps lessen the gap between the home and the youth.

The ASPIRA approach has been successful in securing financial support from foundations, industry, the community it serves and the general community, as well as government. It has been found to be professionally sound as well as practical and productive of results. In its three years of existence the agency has been able to service 2,000 students in their educational plans. Most of these are now making use of educational loans to finance their careers. One hundred two of these secured scholarships to attend a university. This year the Federation of ASPIRA Clubs has 21 individual clubs affiliated to it. These are organized in high schools, community colleges, churches, community centers, etc. where there are many Puerto Rican youths. The club program reaches on a weekly basis nearly 1,000 members. The Federation of Puerto Rican Parents has 1,000 members who are engaged in an educational program to create in the home a healthy environment for education, achievement and aspiration.

This is the solution developed by an ethnic group of recent arrival to the United States who had to confront the problem of adaptation to the new environment on the one hand and the question of identity on the other.

I am returning to my original concern with identity. For a group of people (any group of people) to be able to resolve the problems that beset them, they must have a sense of identity in order to be involved and committed in finding the solutions to their problems and later to the problems of others.